

The Challenge of Religious Pluralism*

The Indian Experience

India has given birth to two of the world's 'great' religions: Hinduism and Buddhism. It has welcomed two others: Christianity and Islam. Besides these, there are many others like Zoroastrianism, Jainism, and Sikhism, not to speak of a great variety of primal religions. The Indian tradition takes pride in its attitude of tolerance. The Buddhist emperor Ashoka in the third century before the common era enjoined on his people by edict mutual religious tolerance and appointed special officers to implement it. Guru Nanak, following the poet-saint Kabir and others, founded Sikhism, seeking to integrate elements of Hinduism and Islam. The Mogul emperor Akbar in the 16th century dreamed of a new religion that would bring together the best elements in every religion including Christianity. The Hindu saint Ramakrishna claimed to practice devotion to Jesus and to Allah in the 19th century. Inter-religious prayer meetings were a regular part of Gandhi's movement for independence and religious harmony.

Such an age-old tradition seems to be falling apart in India today. Hindu-Muslim conflicts seem endemic causing riots and killings year after year. The violence in the Punjab and Kashmir has also religious roots. The Christians complain of increasing discrimination. The great religions are competing in courting the followers of primal religions. Religious pluralism has become a source of conflict socially and politically, even if economic factors too may underlie these conflicts. The religious minorities seem particularly concerned by what they see as growing Hindu fundamentalism. Some however see Hindu fundamentalism as a reaction to Muslim and even Christian fundamentalism. The Muslims claimed a separate homeland and got the

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country divided at the time of its independence from the British. The Christians are accused of proselytizing the tribal peoples in a game of numbers which could have political consequences in a democracy. The consequence of all this is that religions have become a source of conflicts.

The Secular Response

The conflicts are not new. The Hindu-Muslim conflict goes back to the pre-independence period. But the new India chose not to be a Hindu state, but a secular one, equally positive to people of all religions. The Fathers of the Indian Constitution crafted a very finely tuned political structure. The state is not anti-religious. It is not a-religious either. But it does not relate to or support one religion more than another. It affirms equality, fraternity, and justice for all its citizens, irrespective of their religious affiliation. All enjoy their fundamental rights. But at the same time the Constitution takes into account the fact of religious diversity in its social dimensions, particularly in relation to religious minorities. This is shown in two ways. At the level of civil law, the religious communities are allowed to be governed by their own personal laws in what concerns areas like marriage, inheritance, their own internal order, etc. Here the Indian Constitution followed British practice. The Constitution however seems to have taken this as a provisional measure, since it suggested that the country should have a common civil code in course of time.

The religious minorities are also allowed, not only to freely practice and propagate their religion, but to found and manage denominational institutions like schools, university colleges and hospitals, even with financial subsidy from the state. The Courts have consistently upheld these rights except in cases where personal law might conflict with a fundamental right guaranteed by the Constitution. In such cases the Courts have opted rather for the fundamental right. In a celebrated case some years ago the Court ordered alimony to be paid to a Muslim woman, when

it was not required by the Muslim personal law. The Parliament had to pass a special measure to 'protect' the Muslim personal law. The establishment of a secular state and the special protection offered to the religious minorities can be seen as the secular response to the situation of religious pluralism.

The Response of the Religious Groups

How do the different religious groups respond to this problem of religious pluralism? At a really popular level, there is not only tolerance, but also mutual hospitality. Even today it is not unusual to see people belonging to different religions visiting popular pilgrim centres of one or other religion seeking special favours. In some centres, during the festivals, such participation may even have an institutional form. Some fundamentalist groups however are trying today to put an end to such 'ecumenical' practice in the name of defending the purity of their religion.

At the more official level, the approach of the different religious groups could be considered broadly inclusivist. Let me refer briefly to the three great religions. One of the great ideologues of the Islamic movement in the subcontinent was Mawlana Syed Abdul Ala Mawdudi. He hopes for the unity of the country around Islam. Only when the country was divided did he opt for Pakistan. Such a vision may not be unrelated to the memory of Muslim rule in the country for many centuries before the coming of the British. But the vision was primarily a religious, rather than a political one, though it is difficult to separate the two in Islamic tradition.

The Hindu response, supported by some of the religious leadership today, is to consider India as Hindu, culturally and religiously, though it would be tolerant towards the minorities. They would consider India as having a cultural past extending over four millennia, in terms of its arts, literature and mythology, that is primarily Hindu. All Indians are heirs to this common culture, even if some of them have chosen to worship other gods in their private life. The Hindu religion is tolerant and is broad

enough to make room for *istadevatas* or chosen deities for personal worship. The distinction between religion and culture is not too clear in their discourse.

The Christians as a minority group tend to be defensive. But their theological vision remains inclusive. One tends to think of other believers as anonymous Christians and of Christianity as the fulfilment of the other religions. I think that if the Christians were a majority, they would probably speak like the Hindus. At this very moment (October 1995), in the controversy regarding the presence of a crucifix in the class room, the regional parliament of Bavaria in Germany is projecting a law that declares the special relationship of the State with the Christian tradition, though the feelings of dissenting religious minorities will be respected. The Concordats between the State and the Holy See provide for special relationships in many countries.

One can see that these attitudes, while manifested at socio-political levels, are rooted in religious perspectives. Christianity and Islam are universalist in their vision and objectives. Hinduism too, in the 19th and 20th centuries, through people like Vivekananda and Radhakrishnan, spoke a universal language, seeing in Hinduism, particularly in the Vedanta form of it, a universal religion that underlies all others. This was the basis of its tolerance.

The Drawback of Recent Theology

However, their special experience in Asia and their reflection on mission has also led the Christians to speak a language of dialogue, to seek to practice it in their lives and to justify it theologically. It is this reflection that I would like to explore today rather briefly. Theology, at least in the third world, is seen to have a dialectic, mediating function. It starts from experience. It tries to answer questions, clarify doubts, check paradigms and justify or reconstruct world views when a community feels its faith perspectives challenged by its experience. Such clarifica-

tion and refocussing lead the community to greater commitment and more effective praxis. By this measure of what theology should be or do we find the recent theological discussions concerning other religions very inadequate.

For many years now, any discussion on religious pluralism is conducted within a paradigm set by the terms: exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism. The question on which the paradigm is based is: Are religions salvific? If one says: only my religion is salvific, the others are not, then one is an exclusivist. If one says: all religions are salvific in their own way, then one is a pluralist. If one says: salvation is available in other religions, but they are all somehow included in the project of my own religion, then one is inclusivist. This may be useful as a classification of points of view. But it is an abstract, a-priori scheme. It looks at religions simply as systems related to salvation, even though religions may differ from one another in the way they look at themselves and may mean very different things by what they mean by salvation. Felix Wilfred, an Indian theologian, sees this as a dispute between two schools of thought in Western academic circles: dogmatic universalism and liberal pluralism.¹ Inclusivism is then seen as a mediating position. The problem with this scheme is that all great religions tend to be inclusivist in some way, as we saw above. The scheme helps to classify the opinions of theologians. But it has nothing to say to people as they experience religion and its relation to life, in a multi-religious context. In such a multi-religious experiential situation, exclusivism is not helpful, pluralism can be a recipe for chaos and inclusivism may be a thinly veiled desire, if not attempt, at domination, not accepting the Other as different. Such a paradigm, though logical and neat, is hardly useful for animating and guiding any kind of action in the multi-religious field.

I would like therefore to explore certain ideas and trends that are emerging in India out of a multi-religious experience.

1. Cf. Felix Wilfred, "Some Tentative Reflections on the Language of Christian Uniqueness. An Indian Perspective", *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection* 57 (1993) 652-672.

Let us then start with a brief look at this experience. I would like to evoke here four types of experience with the kind of questions that they are raising.

The Indian Experience

Being a small minority of 2.5% in the country, Christians live, study, play and work with other believers. The other religion is not simply an idea or a system. It is other people with whom one is constantly in touch with all kinds of living situations. In spite of being a minority group, the Christians have many prominent educational and health institutions, thanks partly to the aid of the State. The majority of the beneficiaries of these institutions are members of other religions. Let us take the schools as an example. Education should contribute to the holistic growth of a person. Religion is a necessary dimension that grounds moral and spiritual values in the life of people. Considering this, Catholic educators have started asking themselves whether they have a responsibility for the growth of the young persons in their schools in their own religious convictions. How can this be done? A popular way of putting this question is: In our schools, should we make Hindus, better Hindus? Can this be seen as one of the goals of our mission?

It is becoming more and more frequent today that groups of people, particularly the young, are involved in development and liberation projects, in the defence of human, economic and social rights, and in protecting the environment. These groups are multi-religious. Questions do arise whether religion is relevant to such issues and what role, if any, religion(s) should play, especially in multi-religious groups, apart from inspiring the commitment of individuals?

A third type of experience has to do with Christians who are involved with people of other faiths in one way or another. As relations deepen, one comes into contact with the religious dimension of the others. This may often happen in limit or crisis situations. One may also meet others in study or dialogue situations. The other religions then cease being systems or institu-

tions and begin to wear a human face. One comes to admire the human and spiritual depth of the other. Such an experience obviously raises questions about the religion which can lead them to such depths.

Finally, there is an increasing interest among Indian Christians in becoming really Indian. One explores one's cultural and spiritual roots in Indian tradition. One tries to practise Indian methods of prayer. One reads the Indian Scriptures and other spiritual writings. For some this can become a process of intra-personal dialogue between two traditions which one has inherited and which one seeks to integrate. One then speaks of being a Hindu-Christian. At the same time one also sees Hindus, who are deeply influenced by Jesus and the Gospel, but who are happy to remain Hindu, though inspired and enriched. Gandhi is a good example. Institutions and boundaries mean nothing to such people. Such experiences raise questions of identity and belongingness.

Any adequate theology of religions must be able to look at some of these questions and offer concrete directions for living. Let me now try to outline a few emerging perspectives. I shall do so in three parts. First of all, I shall point to some general principles. Then I shall evoke a theological vision. Finally, I shall indicate some orientations for practice.

The Absolute and the Relative

Religion is not primarily a system of creeds, moral codes and ritual. Religion is the experience and expression of a relationship between God and a human-person-in-community. God, desiring to communicate God's life, manifests God's self and invites the persons to respond. The people respond in faith, commitment and obedience. The structures of religion can facilitate and seek to embody this encounter. But such encounters can take place outside these structures too. A person, for example, may encounter God more authentically in the poor than in a liturgical celebration. In such a context we have to affirm

that it is not religions that are salvific. It is always God who saves in and through or even outside a religion. Religions are useful, but not necessary, mediations. They are ambiguous. They may be prophetic, but they also tend to legitimize existing socio-political structures.

Faced with such a divine-human encounter, meeting another believer should mean for us listening to his/her experience and admiring the interplay of the divine and the human freedoms in the concrete circumstances of his/her life. The religious systems that people follow are secondary. They have a social and sometimes even a political role. So they cannot be ignored. But we have to learn to reach out to the human persons and their religious experience.

God is the Absolute beyond name and form. Our imaginations and speculations do not circumscribe God. All that we can say is, in Sankara's words, *neti, neti* - not this, not this. But when there is a divine self-communication, it is limited and conditioned in various ways by the circumstances in which it takes place. The history of religions tells us that God's self-manifestations are often linked to a place, which then becomes a holy place. The divine self-manifestation also happens at particular time. While God is present always and everywhere, people do recognize key moments - the *kairos* - of God's presence and activity in the life-stories of persons and communities. Both God's self-expression and its understanding, reception or experience by the human person take place in the context of a particular culture with its language and other symbol systems. The quality and extent of the experience of the divine by the person or community are conditioned by their capacity and preparedness. Finally God is free to limit the extent of God's self-revelation. We can see the multiplicity of circumstances - I have listed five - that condition and limit the experience and expression of divine-human encounter. It is true that people reach out to the Absolute beyond its many limited manifestations. But people comprehend the Absolute, never as it is, but always in and through its mani-

festations. The Absolute constitutes the horizon in which the multiplicity of manifestations becomes meaningful. But the manifestations themselves are relative, that is related to the Absolute that they manifest. This is true even of Jesus who emptied himself in becoming human and of course of the pilgrim Church. We must distinguish this relatedness to God from the other subjective relativity that looks at the limitedness of the human person experiencing God.

This interplay between the Absolute and the relative in divine-human encounter leads me to spell out the relationship between, what I shall call, history and mystery. Let me start with an analogy. Two persons love each other. Their love finds expression in word and gesture or even in silent togetherness. There are some peak moments. But love is not limited to any of these expressions. It is constantly reaching out. It is beyond all these and makes all these meaningful. It would not be real and experiential without these. Love therefore becomes a story, that the lovers may be able to spell out in a narrative. But it is not merely historical, in so far as it transcends all its historical experiences and expressions. In this it reflects the complex nature of the human person as spirit-in-body.

I think that this analogy can help us to understand the relation between history and mystery. Sometimes we seem to picture God's eternity as endless time. But as a matter of fact, it is a dimension that provides time its depth, foundation and meaning. God's manifestations are always in history, but they are more than merely historical. They transcend history in an eternity where there is only presence, neither past nor future. But this eternal present can manifest itself in history only as a historical process. The historical process therefore finds its unity and dynamism in the perspectives of eternity.

These three principles may sound very abstract. I hope you can see their basis in human experience. We shall soon see

how they are relevant to our theological reflection concerning religions.

Religions and the Reign of God

Our properly theological reflection starts with the realization that members of other religions too are encountering God. This is not simply a supposition, but a fact of experience, using the Scriptural criterion: 'from their fruits you will know them'. I think that such experience of the other is an essential starting point for our reflection. Otherwise it will be hypothetical and abstract. Given the human and the social nature of persons, we realize further that their experience of God is taking place in and through their various religions, not in spite of them. God as well as the others are making use of these symbol systems that structure their life and experience.

We can make sense of this experience in the perspective of the mission of God as described by the Second Vatican Council. In its decree on mission it offers us a Trinitarian vision. God from a fountain-like love sends the Son and the Spirit creates us and calls us to share in God's life and glory. "He generously pours out, and never ceases to pour out, his divine goodness, so that he who is creator of all things might at last become 'all in all' (1 Cor. 15:28)". The Church is also sent on this same mission.² This means that God's saving action embraces the whole universe and the whole of human history. It is from this point of view that the Council can affirm the universal salvific will, through which God reaches out to every human person.³ God's plan is to lead all thing to unity (Eph. 1: 1-10; 1 Cor. 15:28) and new life (Rev 21:1-5). It includes also the cosmos (Rom. 8:19-22). This is a global project.

In view of this global mission God communicates God's self in various ways and at various times through many prophets. In the course of this story of divine self communication, God

2. Cf. Ad. Gentes, 2.

3. Cf. Gaudium et Spes, 22.

sends the Son into the world (Heb 1:1-2). Jesus proclaims the Reign of God, pointing to the ever present activity of God in the world and calls people to conversion (MK 1:15). Jesus' commitment to the Reign of God is two-fold. On the one hand it involves a new way of life of poverty and humility, love and forgiveness, selflessness and sharing. One can see this spelt out in the Sermon on the Mount. On the other hand, in a world which is not living in the way of God and where there is oppression, discrimination and exploitation in an ongoing struggle between the rich and the poor, Jesus takes the side of the poor, invites them to his fellowship, and offers his own life in sacrifice. Looking at the Jesus-event in the light of Asian religions, Aloysius Pieris points out that while the vision of the Beatitudes can be found also in them, Jesus' option to be with the poor and to struggle with them is something very characteristic of him.⁴ The mystery of the cross and resurrection gives a special meaning to suffering and affirms life and hope.

Jesus in his turn sends the community of his disciples on mission to be living witnesses to the Reign of God in the world. In relation to the Reign of God its role is symbolic/sacramental⁵ not exclusive. It does not monopolize, but visualizes the action of God in the world. It is at the service of God's reign, contributing to its growing realization in history. In its service of the Reign of God, the Church has as its model Christ himself who did not seek his own glory, but emptied himself in order to obey the call of God more effectively. We should not too quickly identify Christianity with Christ. The Church is also a pilgrim with others walking towards the fullness of the Reign of God.

God's reign, while it has a particular prophetic witness in the Church, is not limited to it, but reaches out to all people, even in and through their own religions. This is why it is possi-

4. See Aloysius Pieris 'An Asian Paradigm: Inter-religious Dialogue and Theology of Religious', *The Month*, April 1993, pp 129-134.

5 Cf *Lumen Gentium*, 1.

ble for the Church to be at the service of the Reign of God and to facilitate its realization without necessarily building itself up.⁶

What is the role of Jesus in this history of salvation? While the early Church spent a lot of energy and time trying to understand and describe the personality of Jesus as divine and human, there is no agreed theory on his role in the process of redemption. Without going into the various theories of Atonement as transaction, conflict, enlightenment, solidarity, intercession, etc.⁷ I would suggest that we avoid two sorts of approaches and propose a third one. One approach would identify the saving act with a particular event 2000 years ago and seek to relate to that event the whole of history before and after. I think that this is a simplistic physical, almost materialistic view that does not respect the complexity of the divine mystery and the interplay of freedom in human history. The other approach is a transcendental one relating redemption to the cosmic Christ or Word. This gives the Jesus-event a merely indicative role. Neither does it offer history and the other religions their proper place and meaning. I would therefore suggest a third, more eschatological approach. God's saving action in history, in the Word and the Spirit, through the Church as well as through the other religions is in process. It is God's ongoing salvific dialogue with human persons-in-community. We are called to contemplate and collaborate with this process. We know that God is present and effective in history and in other religions. We know of God's particular self-manifestation in Jesus. We are called to follow his way and be witnesses to it through our life and action in the world. The mission of Jesus is at the service of the mission of God. We must not reduce one to the other.

The way that the various manifestations of God are articulated among themselves in the history of salvation has to be

6. Cf. M. Amaladoss, 'Le Royaume, but de la Mission', *Spiritus* 34 (1995) 305-318.

7. See Michael Winter, *The Atonement* (London, Geoffrey Chapman, 1995)

worked out in history and will be fully clear only on the last day. In the meantime, the followers of Jesus are called to witness to his way of option for the poor even unto death and pray and work for the coming of the Reign of God by being catalysts of the great reconciliation and unification of all things that is God's plan for the universe. The uniqueness of Jesus must not be explained in terms of something that happened 2000 years ago. Jesus, in and through the community of his disciples, is an eschatological presence and force as history is moving towards its consummation. There is freedom for the interplay of all the religions in their identity and difference. The Church itself is only one element in this dialectic. It is a dialectic between the Church and the Kingdom, between Jesus and the Christ. The two poles of this dialectic must neither be separated, nor confused. This vision makes place for other religions. We Christians cannot think of history without Christ. But the fullness of Christ is in the future. The freedom of the Spirit and of the humans are also respected. A-priori speculations about the centrality of Jesus from a linear historical point of view or about his uniqueness from a comparative point of view are not necessary. By doing so we are not respecting the mystery of God, but only betray our prejudice and presumption. Discourse about the uniquenesses of Jesus are often affirmations about the uniqueness of the Church.

This theological reflection has led us, on the one hand, to a global vision of the mystery of God working in the world and, on the other, to God's call to us in Jesus to participate in the struggle for justice on the side of the poor, the oppressed and the marginalized. This option for the poor is the horizon which must guide our collaboration with others - followers of other religions and all people of good will.

Mission in Dialogue

What are the practical implications of this vision? I think that in the multi-religious situation of India, we have to support

the two-fold option of the Indian Constitution, namely the secularization of public life and the protection of minorities. This practice should be supported by ongoing dialogue and collaboration between all believers and all people of good will. It is in this context that we must continue to bear witness to the way of Jesus and to the plan of God as we see it.

In a world where people are complaining about secularization, the demand to secularize public life may sound unusual. The growing differentiation between social institutions like religions and politics is one consequence of secularization and I think that such a development can only be welcomed in a multi-religious society. This does not mean that religions should not have any influence in public life. It only means that this impact is not institutional but human; to be maintained through constant witness and conversation. A secular spirit would require that members of a group agree upon common human, social and political goals, even if each person or sub-group finds justification for such an option in terms of their own faith perspectives. It is from this point of view that theologians in India speak of Basic Human, rather than Basic Christian Communities. This means that we forego a specifically Christian voice in public life, except in special circumstances.

The move towards a common civil code will be a difficult challenge for us in the near future. Without interfering in the deeper religious convictions of the communities, the State must be able to spell out and defend the fundamental human, social and economic rights of every citizen and group. It is obvious that such a common civil code cannot be developed in an atmosphere of mutual suspicion. Religions too will have to learn to distinguish between their faith perspectives and their moral consequences. However, the tension between a common civil code and the beliefs of particular religious groups is not limited to India and we may be able to learn from the experience of others. It will certainly be helpful to differentiate between what is legal and what is moral.

A democratic order does not automatically promote universal equality and participation. It can easily become the tyranny of a majority. Where this majority is based on religious factors it can lead to inter-religious strife. That is why a special provision to protect the rights of religious minorities is meaningful. The risk is that the minorities may misuse such protection.

At the religious level, the challenge we face is that of collaboration and dialogue. All religions - if we leave aside some extreme sects - in spite of a tendency to legitimate existing socio-political structures, seek to promote a better life for people in peace and community. I think that this should be the focus of inter-religious collaboration. Dialogue should be one element of this collaboration. The best way of promoting such collaboration is to engage in defence of the poor.

Collaboration can be enriched and deepened by dialogue at a religious level where we discover and relate to the other in his/her deepest levels of religious and moral convictions and options. Such dialogue can lead, beyond the knowledge and study of each other's religious traditions, to sharing in spiritual experience. Indian reflection has been positive to common reading of Scriptures and common praying. If one accepts that the other is encountering God in his/her own tradition and that the Scriptures and rituals are only expressions of such encounter, then sharing in them is not a problem, provided the community-in-difference is respected and one aims at mutual prophecy and growth rather than an easy eirenicism that limits itself to the lowest common denominator.

Dialogue always includes witness to one's own deepest convictions. If the proclamation of the Good News is not proselytism, it can only be dialogical, respecting the freedom of others and of the Spirit, who calls to conversion. There cannot be authentic dialogue without a clear, lived and secure identity. But identity does not need barriers. One can have a community with a firm centre, but with open frontiers. God is free to call people to become disciples of Jesus. But if we read the

signs of the times today, perhaps God's plan is calling all religions to a convergent movement towards the Reign of God.

One consequence of such dialogue in the public sphere in India is intra-personal dialogue, in which many Indian Christians today would see another religious tradition as another element of one's own religious roots. Such an intra-personal tension and eventual process of ongoing, perhaps never-terminated, integration can only lead to a more authentic inter-personal dialogue.

Conclusion

In concluding let me once again briefly spell out the theological affirmations that we have made in the course of this reflection. We have affirmed the primacy of God and God's action in the universe. Salvation is not seen in personal, but in global terms. Salvation is not understood in material or physical terms, but in human, historical and dialogical terms. The special significance of Jesus is seen both in his option for the poor and in terms of an eschatological impact on history in the building up of the Reign of God. Believers of different religions are seen in their own individuality as different, but as called to a convergent communion that is not pre-determined. Inter-religious dialogue is set in the context of the liberation of all peoples. We Christians find our own identity not in domination in the name of God, but in self-emptying service of the Reign of God, following and witnessing to the way of Jesus. Dialogue reaches its depth in intra-personal integration.

The Asian Bishops have spelt out the goal of inter-religious dialogue as harmony. In spite of many conflicts and contradictions they detect positive signs of hope. Let me end with their words.

What is positively significant is the desire among peoples of various faiths to break down traditional barriers of division and hostility, and their initiative to reach out to neighbours of other faiths in a spirit of love, friendship, harmony and collaboration. We believe that this fraternal dialogue

among peoples of various faiths will gain in strength and contribute to the achievement of a harmonious society to the extent it makes its own the concern for human dignity and equality, for democracy and legitimate autonomy of world realities. In all these aspirations, movements and initiatives, we discern the hand of God who has always guided the destinies of our peoples in the past. They are for us tangible signs of his continued presence among us.⁸

M. Amaladoss, S J.

8. C. G. Arevalo and G. Rosales (eds), *For All the Peoples of Asia* (Manila, Claretian, 1993), pp. 318-319.